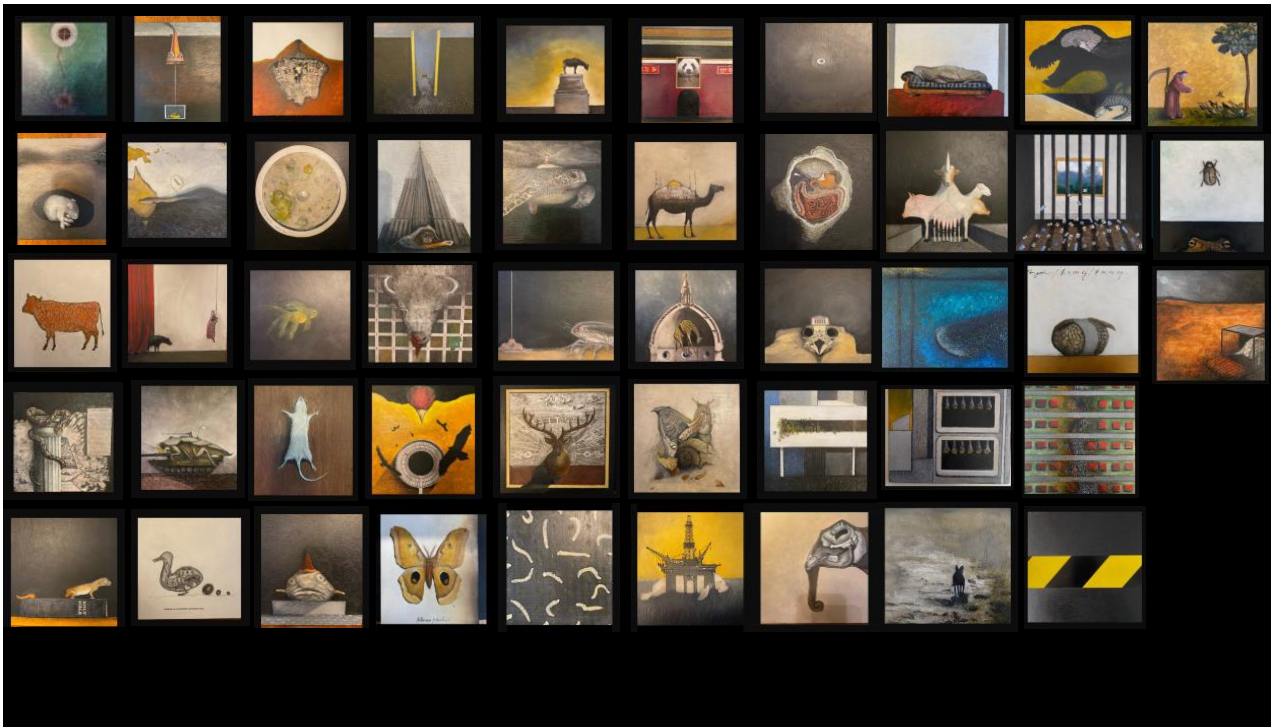


THE HUMAN CONDITION

Richard Weller



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Overview

In his 1933 painting *The Human Condition* Henri Magritte replaces the landscape seen out of a window with a painting of the same landscape. While purporting to be the real thing, Magritte's landscape also exposes itself as merely an image, thus capturing a certain self-consciousness of perception as fundamental to the human condition. John Berger assumes a similar position in his book *Why Look at Animals?* The obvious answer is that in doing so, for better or worse, we construct what it means to be human. That is, we construct culture through assertions of its differences and similarities to that which we simultaneously imagine as nature. As is now apparent on a planetary scale, these assertions have life and death consequences for all living things.

The question motivating this series of 48 paintings is how, on the occasion of the sixth extinction, should we conceive of the relationship between culture and nature? One answer might be that one should *not* do what I have done, namely, continue to present individual species as isolated objects projected capriciously through human eyes, i.e., anthropomorphism. In that case one would attempt to show the world from the animal's perspective, or, in a more ecological vein, insist on representing the relationships *between* things, not the things themselves.

Much as I admire these approaches there is always the lingering suspicion that they too are just more variations on the anthropomorphic. As such, I decided not to try to transcend anthropomorphism as if it were false consciousness. Instead, I have tried to map its various guises, emphasizing how it implicates humans and non-humans in what is now a *denatured* world. Irrespective of whether one gets there by trying to see through animal eyes, by emphasizing ecological relationships or, in my case, by flaunting anthropomorphism, the aim these projects share is to forge greater empathy with the more-than-human world.

Recalling Magritte, the overarching title for this series of paintings, is "The Human Condition". Each of the 48 works is then assigned the common name of the species that it takes as its way into the problem of the gap between the human and non-human, between us and them. *Richard Weller, 2024*

A note on each:

1. Microbe

We live in an age of extreme scales, an age concerned with understanding how micro events cause macro effects, an age in which technology seeks to fully understand and harness the power of both the cell and the atom, an age in which a human is understood more as a symbiotic collection of microbes than an autonomous self, let alone something made by a God.

2. Moth

This Polyphemus moth and the slab to which it is pinned recall the inexplicable behaviour of moths attracted to light sources flying too close to the flame.

3. Cane Beetle

To mitigate the destruction of Australia's sugar cane crop by the cane beetle (*Dermolepida albohirtum*), 102 cane toads (51 male and 51 female) were imported to Australia in 1935. As it happened the toads preferred other insects to the cane beetle and have since themselves become an invasive species.

4. Snake

Here the enigma of the snake is rendered as a geological force or earth spirit wending its way through the paradise of suburbia.

5. Giraffe

The first giraffe in Europe was presented to Lorenzo De Medici in 1486 by the Sultan of Egypt, Burji Mamluk. Before it died (by breaking its neck in its bespoke enclosure), the giraffe was allowed to walk, free-range, around Florence savouring titbits passed by citizens from their first-floor windows. In this image, the giraffe—the tallest of animals—is winched up into the dome of Brunelleschi's Duomo, Florence's tallest building.

6. Donkey

There are plenty of statues of men on horses riding into history, but I've never seen a monument to the animal that has shouldered most of the burden – the donkey.

7. Vulture

The building in this work is known as a Tower of Silence and is used for funereal rites by the Parsis in India. Corpses of men, women and children are laid on the concentric rings of slabs and left to be stripped of flesh by vultures. The remaining bones are swept into the (dark) well at the centre.

8. Cow

The hide of this cow is inscribed with a collection of brands used by cattle owners throughout the history of ranching in Texas.

9. Quoll

The quoll is emblematic of conservation and rewilding efforts in Australia to prevent further loss of endemic species to invasives such as cats.

10. Wombat

Inspired by Australia's 'Black Summer', this baby wombat is nestled in a burrow waiting for a fire to pass.

11. Parrot

In this work, inspired by Magritte's painting *The Human Condition*, a parrot has escaped its cage and flown out into the landscape, leaving a trail of broken language behind.

12. Duck

Considered a great achievement of the French enlightenment, the 'Digesting Duck'—a prototypical robot invented by Jaques de Vaucanson in 1764—neatly expresses Rene Descartes' (1596–1650) view that animals, unlike humans, are "mere automata".

13. Crown of Thorns Starfish

Along with climate change, the Crown of Thorns starfish is renowned as a threat to coral on the Great Barrier Reef. In this image the starfish is being injected with poison by a COTSbot—a robot designed by scientists at Queensland University of Technology to seek and destroy the harmful starfish.

14. Dugong

This dugong coupled with infrastructure from the petrochemical industry obviously suggests that (like all species) the dugong's fate is bound up with climate change. It can also imply that our own fate is linked to the dugong.

15. Whale Shark

Whale sharks congregate annually in the Persian Gulf where the footings of oil and gas infrastructure promulgate marine life upon which the sharks feed. The deep blue bliss of the whale shark is contrasted with the surface of the ocean and dark pipes in flames.

16. Camel

The resilient camel carries Islam on its back as war breaks out, again, just over the horizon.

17. Canary

The proverbial canary in the coal mine hearkens back to the beginning of the industrial revolution—the incipient dawn of our climate changed world.

18. Crow

Throughout history the crow (raven) has been assigned disconcerting powers. The enigma of the crow is to do with its black form as seen from a distance, but the uncanniness of the crow is exacerbated by a stare they seem to look right through us, as if we are not even there.

19. Python

The python recalls the Pythia of Delphi, earth spirit and oracle, set here against an engraving of Eden by Athanasius Kircher in 1675.

20. Frog

Just a frog getting on with being a frog.

21. Cockroach

The cockroach has morphed into a tank and launched its retaliation against humans, albeit one flying the white flag.

22. Silkworm

The unsung heroes of beautiful fabrics.

23. Hyena

Always the villain. This staging is reminiscent of Francis Bacon.

24. Dog

The black dog is based on a still taken from Andrei Tarkovsky's haunting film 'The Stalker'.

25. Pangolin

The defensively curled-up pangolin, gaffer-taped for transit, is emblematic of the international illegal wildlife trade.

26. Owl

Athena, goddess of Athens, was represented as an owl because she could see in all directions. Here, an owl's skull is mounted into the topography of the Acropolis.

27. Walrus

Humans in cold climates have an especially close relationship with the walrus, using every part of its body. Walrus's also bond closely with humans in the absence of natural parents. Relentlessly slaughtered and now being displaced by climate change, the walrus is a tragic figure. The question here is what does the walrus think?

28. Gecko

Geckos lived in Solomon's Temple and still live in the ruins of Jerusalem, but ecologists report today that their metabolisms are panicked during bombardment.

29. Panda

The Chinese government uses pandas as diplomatic gifts. The pandas are bred as part of well-funded government programs and rented out to certain nations with whom the communist party wishes to cultivate its geopolitical relations. In this case, a panda replaces Mao Zedong's portrait on the wall of the Forbidden City facing Tiananmen Square.

30. Snail

The snail struggles to maintain its form after being stepped on.

31. Turtle

Homage to the green sea turtles swimming around the Byron Bay lighthouse.

32. Bison

After centuries of slaughter bison are returning to parts of the American landscape beyond Yellowstone National Park.

33. Oyster

The lascivious oyster, here containing the soft entrails of their human predators.

34. Lizard

The shock of seeing a blue tongue lizard in the suburbs in summer, opens the door to evolution's monstrous shadows.

35. Orang-utan

Orang-utans' use of cardboard boxes to hide from the constant gaze of zoo visitors is reminiscent of how many homeless construct privacy shelters in the jungle of Manhattan.

36. Rat

Almost universally reviled, the rat is in fact a remarkably successful and lovable animal. Along with mice they are also routinely crucified in the name of scientific progress.

37. Eel

Every 15 years or so eels swim from rivers, lakes and ponds in eastern Australia to the waters of New Caledonia to mate and die. Unfathomably, the offspring then do the exact journey in reverse, only to repeat the mating ritual 15 years later.

38. Bee

Bees are revered as architects and utopian workers. In this case the bees have built their hive in Le Corbusier's Villa Savoy, icon of the machine age.

39. Ant

An ant colony represented as an inverted Tower of Babel.

40. Goldfish

To what degree do goldfish know they are trapped in the reflections of the human gaze?

41. Elephant

Across a spectrum reaching from divine veneration, to commodity and the ridicule of the circus, the elephant is probably the most represented/anthropomorphised animal of all. So how to depict the elephant today? In this case, the animal serves no human related purpose image and the image shifts from anatomical to surficial to highlight the fact that this elephant has had its tusk removed.

42. Blobfish

The blobfish lives on the bottom of the ocean and does nothing. It holds the title of the World's Ugliest Animal, but it is represented here in its role as official mascot of the International Society of Comedians.

43. Lobster

The lobster confronts the imminent prospect of ocean mining.

44. Fruit Bat

Sydney's fruit bat colony has occupied the Sirius building, local icon of social justice on the one hand and luxury harborside living on the other.

45. Deer

Deer as a trophy set into a 'bird's eye view' of the Castle Garden in Karlsruhe (1739). Unsporting aristocratic hunters would use the formal avenues as clear sight lines to shoot deer that the 'beaters' roused from the forested depths of the gardens.

46. Human

The human animal is shown as duplicitous; on the one hand the kindness of St Francis of Assisi, on the other, the executioner.

47. Beast

In the manner of fantastic animals in medieval bestiaries the contemporary beast is a combination of chicken, sheep, pig and cow in a concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO).

48. Extinct

This image registers the absence of the animal behind crime scene tape.

The artworks in this exhibition are not for sale. Richard Weller is willing to paint paintings based on this series for a commission rate of \$500. If you are interested, please contact the gallery staff.



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